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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the role of serving the public interest and how that relates to education. The document provides specific examples of how education reform efforts in Massachusetts often were couched in such vague terms as to be ineffective in establishing educational standards. The paper discusses how politics influences educational policy and what attempts have been made to straighten out some of the confusion. The paper cites examples of the vagaries of educational jargon found in the educational mandates and how the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 has been undercut. The document advocates that citizen policy makers must be prepared to keep doing the same work over and over again, repeatedly addressing the same tendencies in education toward imprecision and vagueness that are inimical to reform. (EH)

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# The Responsibilities of Citizen Policymakers and the Place of Public Opinion in Education Reform.

by Edwin J. Delattre

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**NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR  
HISTORY EDUCATION**  
Lake Geneva, WI  
October 18, 1997

**THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF CITIZEN POLICY MAKERS  
AND THE PLACE OF  
PUBLIC OPINION IN EDUCATION REFORM**

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I am delighted to be in your company today and grateful for the invitation of the National Council for History Education, conveyed by Elaine Reed, to speak with you. I have been asked to address "The Responsibilities of Citizen Policy Makers and the Place of Public Opinion in Education Reform."

I am a philosopher, and most of my work for the past twenty-five years has been concentrated on ethics and the public trust. I have done my best to teach that people in positions of public trust have a moral obligation to live up to higher intellectual and moral standards than the public they serve—primarily because they have voluntarily accepted responsibility for serving the public interest. The first responsibility—duty—of anyone in a position of public trust is the obligation of competence: the duty to know what you are doing. Fulfillment of this obligation, certainly for a state board or local school committee member, depends on conscientiously undertaking truly massive amounts of homework.

During the first fourteen months of my term on the Massachusetts Board of Education, begun in January 1996, I spent two thousand hours reading and learning about state education statutes and regulations; curriculum frameworks and drafts; sample examinations; contracts with vendors; the composition of framework drafting and assessment development committees and the staff of the Department of Education; endless piles of largely worthless educationist and special interest group publications that

influenced state and federal policy and thinking; key legislators in matters of education law; and the condition of education reform in other states and countries. I devoted time to extensive correspondence with the public, educators, lawmakers, bureaucrats, and opinion makers; and I also spent time attending classes in schools.

I realize that few citizen policy makers can afford to spend so much time on volunteer work. But no one who lacks the time or the patience for a heavy diet of homework can learn enough to identify the directions of and pitfalls for education reform. I hasten to add that the hours I have invested would have yielded a lot less had it not been for patient and deeply knowledgeable instruction, guidance, counsel, and tireless help from my friends and senior research associates in the Boston University School of Education, Paul Gagnon and Susan Goldsmith, other trusted scholars and teachers such as Boston University Associate Provost Peter Wood, and other members of our faculty and staff.

Let me frame illustrations of my sense of how things stand in the context of NCHE's urgent recommendation that "the minimum qualification for every middle and high school teacher of history classes within social studies should be the successful completion of at least a college minor in history, and preferably a major." I share this view, except that I think whether a major is preferable to a minor depends in part on the quality of the various departments in a specific college or university, in part on whether the institution has a decent core curriculum, and so forth. A major in a weak department is worse than a minor, if it reduces the time that students spend with stronger faculty in other cognate academic and scientific disciplines. I also believe NCHE should say more about the desirability of

academic study in history by elementary and early childhood teachers. I believe, also: first, that state certification tests should be at least the equivalent of a final examination in a college-level course in the academic or scientific subject-matter field the teacher will be certified to teach; and, second, that high school graduation should require, *inter alia*, passing a state examination in history that stresses factual knowledge content and competent logical analysis of content.

But in my study of statute and regulation in education reform in Massachusetts, I learned quickly that everything was anchored in the proposition that “all students can learn at high levels.” This is the logical equivalent of saying that everyone is above average, and it is either so vague as to be useless or else it is transparently false. Worse, it constitutes an invitation to define down “high levels.”

What are its implications in practice? Massachusetts education reform statute and regulation require the establishment of committees for the drafting of curriculum frameworks and the development of state-level assessments in the academic core subjects identified in the 1993 Education Reform Act, including history. These committees have routinely been enormous, since wide and diverse “participation” in education reform has been treated as a higher priority than individual competence. Size, as well as composition, of many such committees has guaranteed that their work will end up in mushy compromises that betray all possibility of academic rigor.

Furthermore, Massachusetts statute conflates the distinction between bilingual education and transitional bilingual education, requiring TBE in the schools and thereby prohibiting English immersion programs that would be far more effective in helping

students whose first language is not English to perform at “high levels.” Moreover, Massachusetts law is far more demanding than federal law in maximum inclusion of special needs students. Given this context, all of the subject area assessment development committees are required to have either a member or an advisor or consultant whose background is in bilingual education and another whose background is in special education—these to insure equity and, ostensibly, universal student performance at “high levels.”

Once I understood this context and the conflicting demands and therefore restrictions it places on the possibility of education reform, I asked the Department of Education to provide me with the membership composition of the state’s history assessment development committee, with a description of the educational background and job responsibilities of each member. The Department accommodated me.

The large history assessment development committee membership included no scholars of history or historians—no professors or teachers of history in colleges, universities, or schools. *All* of the members whose names were provided to me specialized in either transitional bilingual education or special education. By the work of this committee, Massachusetts was supposed to acquire or produce an appropriate set of state-level examinations in history, including the examination required for graduation from high school. This absurdity is rooted in the preposterous claim that all students can achieve at high levels, abetted by the political power of special interest groups whose overwhelming priorities have little or nothing to do with teaching and learning history. I came to understand what to look for in the thicket of education reform regulation by unraveling the consequences of that initial, unsustainable, but hitherto unchallenged, false premise. We

have a rather profoundly different committee in formation now, consisting of scholars, historians, and history teachers—and limited to fewer than a dozen members.

Having learned where to look and what to look for in education reform, I discovered that profound barriers had been erected against the serious study of every academic discipline. It is fair to say that every curriculum framework either drafted or approved in Massachusetts by the fall of 1995 was intellectually indefensible, including history. Curriculum frameworks in such areas as comprehensive health education were having a much more powerful impact in schools than any in the academic disciplines. Since so much of health education is actually advocacy training—often driven by politicized concern for attention to what I call “the disease of the week”—and consumes inordinate time at the expense of study in academic subjects, I needed to know why. The answer was buried in state statutes and regulations.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 identifies as academic “core subjects” mathematics, science and technology, history and social science, English, foreign language, and the arts (Chapter 69, Section I. D.). Inclusion of this list in the Massachusetts Education Reform Act placed these academic core subjects at the center of education reform, of the school curriculum, and of the lion’s share of student time in school. The Reform Act also identifies as “core subjects”: “subjects covered in courses which are part of an approved vocational-technical education program under G. L. c. 74.”

But in 1994, the Massachusetts Department of Education and the Massachusetts Board of Education took regulatory action that undermined the centrality of the Act’s list of academic “core subjects”—and thereby undermined education reform itself.

First, the Department and Board promulgated the 1994 *Student Learning Time Regulations Guide*. In identifying “core subjects,” that *Guide* repeats the list in the Reform Act. But, in Section 603 CMR 27.02, the *Guide* adds to the list of core subjects in the Act “subjects other than those defined as the ‘core academic subjects’ focused on helping students acquire the knowledge and skills described in the Common Core of Learning established by the Board of Education.” To the question, “Do the regulations mandate a certain number of hours per subject?” the *Guide* gives the answer, “No.” (p. 4)

This “redefinition” of “core academic subject” allowed anything that might be associated with the Massachusetts Common Core of Learning, which embraces everything that is worst in the curriculum frameworks and in educationist jargon and fashion, to override the Reform Act. The Common Core of Learning is so badly written, so vapid, so utterly thoughtless, that it allows virtually anything to qualify as knowledge or skill, and thus as a “core subject.”

I will offer just a few examples from the dozens I could provide. Under the heading “Gaining and Applying Knowledge,” the Common Core says the following:

Analyze implications of literary works, and communicate them through speaking, writing, artistic, and other means of expression.

*This means that under the Regulations, any “means of expression” can now be identified as a skill of a core subject.*

Know and understand the nature of the creative process . . . .

*This means that under the Regulations, anything anyone imagines to be “creative” can now be identified as a core subject.*



Develop skills and participate in the arts for personal growth and enjoyment.

*This means that under the Regulations, any enjoyable skill or form of participation can now be used to identify a core subject.*

Make informed and responsible judgments regarding personal health, including avoidance of violence, tobacco, alcohol, drugs, teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

*This means that under the Regulations, anything that has to do with any of these topics can now be identified as a core subject, in direct competition for instructional time with history, mathematics, and other academic core subjects identified in the Education Reform Act.*

Develop skills and participate in physical activities for personal growth, fitness, and enjoyment.

*This means that under the Regulations, physical skill can now be identified as the basis of a core academic subject on a par with, and at the expense of, emphasis on such subjects as history. (Not incidentally, I am the only member of the Board who has always voted in favor of a 60-hour per year minimum requirement in physical education; but I do not view PE as an academic core subject.)*

In addition, the Common Core of Learning, under the heading, "Demonstrate Personal, Social, and Civic Responsibility," says:

Analyze and act on informed opinions about current economic, environmental, political, and social issues affecting Massachusetts, the United States, and the world.

*This means that under the Regulations, current events and skills of advocacy and action on social issues can now be identified as core subjects.*

By allowing the imprecise and vague language of the Common Core of Learning to be used to expand without limit the list of "core subjects," the Department and Board of Education eliminated the academic priority of the core subjects specified in the Reform Act, including history, and contravened the idea of a core as it has been defined in Massachusetts and in other states and countries.

But then, the Board of Education went even farther in nullifying the Reform Act's authority. In 1994, the Board decided "to permit each school committee, after consultation with the school community, to decide for itself which, if any, subjects other than the statutorily defined academic subjects will be considered 'core subjects' in the district's schools." (See R.V. Antonucci Memorandum to the Members of the Board of Education, "Student Learning Time Regulations," October 11, 1996, p. 2.) The Massachusetts Board of Education thus allowed each individual school district to ignore the priority of the list of academic core subjects specified in the Reform Act.

By these actions, the Board and Department of Education made it possible for schools in Massachusetts to acquire the massive funding committed to education under the Reform Act, without honoring the requirement to focus on the academic core subjects identified in that Act. In so doing, the Department and Board undercut the Act, and, with it, educational accountability for student learning of the academic core subjects. They jeopardized the power of the Act to safeguard the educational birthrights of the children and youths of Massachusetts. The study of world history is further undercut by the fact that no public secondary school in Massachusetts requires study of a foreign language for high school graduation.

This does not mean that schools everywhere in Massachusetts are ignoring the Reform Act or reducing the time spent on learning the academic core subjects identified in the Act. It means that because of the actions of the Department and Board, *school districts may do so if they wish, without being in any way accountable under the Education Reform Act for their actions.* Thus have the deepest academic and educational purposes of the

Reform Act been undermined at the state level, by no means least in a weakening of the imperative to study history.

Equally dangerous, the regulations permit local school districts to mandate the study of sexual matters inappropriate to the age and maturity of students, and to foist offensive attitudes on students before they are sufficiently mature to discern how to appraise attitudes by rational criteria. Massachusetts schools can, for instance, require values clarification training and highly ideological sensitivity training, simply by including them in anything they wish to call a core subject. In Massachusetts and elsewhere, much of this claptrap is driven by two false educationist tenets that are relentlessly visited on students: First, that to be tolerant is to be nonjudgmental—when, in fact, to tolerate something, rather than to respect it or treat it with indifference, presupposes having judged that it merits disapproval but not interference. Second, that toleration is the highest mark of wisdom and virtue—when, in fact, a person who thinks *everything* is tolerable, that nothing is intolerable, is a moral idiot who cannot possibly know any significant human history.

What did all this amount to for education reform? Well, if you draft intellectually indefensible curriculum frameworks in academic and other subjects, then nullify by regulation the law that requires special concentration on specific academic core subjects such as history, and then compose the committees that are charged to oversee student performance tests in the academic subjects with members who have no relevant competence, you have effectively reduced education reform to business as usual, while acquiring a lot more easy money to run the business. Add to this mix the unreasonably low admissions and performance standards in most of America's 1300 schools of education, the intellectually banal school of education accreditation standards of NCATE, and the

intellectual bankruptcy of most state certification and recertification standards, and the brew becomes lethal to the serious teaching and learning of any academic subject, including history. (I hasten to add that the general decline of education in colleges of arts and sciences is no blessing, either.)

Perhaps there are shorter and more economical ways to learn what I have thought it necessary to know as a citizen policy maker. If there are such shortcuts, I don't know what they are. I think of citizen policy making by analogy to long-distance running. One of the world class runners who has influenced my own running of marathons and half-marathons, David Bedford, former world record holder for 10,000 meters, said, "Running is a lot like life. Only 10 percent of it is exciting. 90 percent of it is slog and drudge." If 10 percent of citizen policy making is exciting, I haven't found much of it yet. You have to have a real capacity for slog and drudge. And when you do uncover problems that cry out to be fixed, you have to have a strong stomach for failure, because interest-group political pressure on other citizen policy makers may defeat even the most straightforward and rationally irrefutable arguments. My sustained efforts to overturn the 1994 regulations that nullified the Reform Act on academic core subjects have so far been a complete failure—partly because some state board members, legislators, and others, believe that accountability for standards in, say, history, can be guaranteed by state-level tests. They seem to believe that, in student performance assessments, we will easily achieve both high standards and high stakes. That belief flies in the face of the fact that even small education improvements in Massachusetts have involved extended battles, not mere skirmishes.

This is to say that fulfilling duties of competence does not mean that a citizen policy maker's best efforts always count for something. In practice, a lot of hard work never

pays off, although I am delighted to tell you that the new Massachusetts curriculum frameworks in English Language Arts and History/Social Science are intellectually serious, content-based documents largely free of educationist and social studies ideology, dogma, and jargon. All the other Massachusetts frameworks, however, stand in desperate need of overhaul, and the Common Core of Learning does terrible damage in schools every day.

What the Massachusetts Board of Education *has* managed to accomplish in positive education reform, it has accomplished because Bob Antonucci, the commissioner of education, has been entirely on the level with us, and because many of his and our colleagues in the Department of Education have been forthright and hardworking with us. We have suffered some bureaucratic “treason of the clerks,” but not nearly so much as I have seen in other venues. Most members of the Massachusetts Board—recomposed in 1996—have worked actively on policy issues, participated in drafting of the new curriculum frameworks, and done their homework—and education reform in Massachusetts has benefited from the efforts of the Board. Still, we could and should have done better. At times, not least in the drafting and ultimate adoption of the History/Social Science Framework, we were sidetracked by nasty and rancorous disagreements within the Board that spilled over into irresponsible accusations and misrepresentations to the media. Such behavior has no place in citizen policy making. Obviously, we could have avoided such divisive nastiness by rubber-stamping whatever was presented to us by the Department of Education. But rubber-stamping has no place in responsible policy making, either. Responsible policy making resembles serious study of history, in the sense that to do it well, you have to acquire for yourself a lot of factual knowledge, you must have the intellectual power and moral courage to follow the evidence where it leads and act on it, and you must be able to distinguish reasoned argument and application of evidence from the

fallacious *ad hominem*s and special pleading that have become so much a part of now debased public discourse in America.

As I've tried to show, living up to a duty of competence requires paying strict attention to whether consequential statements related to education reform are true. To take a case in point among us here, NCHE captures its utterly rightful concerns about the nature of education of history teachers in the shorthand assertion, "*One cannot teach what one does not know.*" Unfortunately, the assertion is not true. Since ancient times, incompetent or shrewd people have taught falsehood, misinformation, and ideological bias; wasted irreplaceable instructional time; and inculcated systematic incompetence in students. So it was with the sophists of ancient Athens—who withered under the force of Socrates' relentless arguments in dialogue with them. Many sophists claimed they did not need to know the facts about anything, since their mastery of the skills of rhetoric enabled them to persuade the ignorant to believe whatever they wanted them to believe: a sophist could make X appear the stronger case in the morning, and not-X the stronger case in the afternoon, without so much as a nod in the direction of the facts of a given case. They were concerned, not with facts, evidence, or truth, but with *persuasion* of more and less gullible people.

And so it is now with more than a few teachers at the school and college levels who are contemptuous of factual knowledge, as only those who do not feel the yearning to know and understand can be. Teachers whose work is not securely planted in knowledge of subject-matter content almost always become preoccupied with putative skills, while they demean facts by referring to them always "dead facts," and demean memory and memorization by referring to them always as "rote memorization". But without factual

knowledge, without any settled habits of study that include memorizing and remembering, skills vaunted by educationists—such as “problem-solving”—cannot be intelligently applied to anything, including learning.

Can't teach what one does not know? Look at state-certified English teachers from accredited schools of education who cannot reliably teach grammar in standard English because they have mastered neither parts of speech nor the diagramming of sentences. They teach grammar and writing all the same, and they do it badly. Look at the college and school teachers who subject students to the fashionable educational indulgence that “there is no such thing as bad writing.” Such teachers not only teach what they don't know; many of them stand directly in the way of their students' ever learning to write well. Look at the social studies teachers who know shockingly little about history—and who teach history badly under the heading of social studies.

Recently, I watched a state-certified, eleventh-grade U.S. History teacher teach a unit she said was about the Ku Klux Klan. She began by directing her students to the index of the textbook to find the Ku Klux Klan. They then turned to the page and paragraph in the text that described the Klan and identified Nathan Bedford Forrest as one of its founders. Of Nathan Bedford Forrest, beyond the sentence in the textbook—of Forrest as the most feared cavalry officer in the Confederacy, an uneducated but literate tactical genius—the teacher knew nothing. She could not answer any questions from students about who Forrest was. She quickly directed her students to the textbook index entry on the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Then, without even reading the relevant paragraphs in the textbook—not to speak of having done anything to supplement it with primary source material—she said, “See, there was racism when the Klan started, and a hundred

years later there had to be a civil rights act because there was still racism. Now, you've all watched the jury in the O.J. Simpson trial say that America is racist. So, as you can see, nothing has changed in America since the Klan started." Some of her students dutifully took notes. Others listened indifferently. Some seemed to be daydreaming. I sat and wished that all of them could be somewhere else.

This supposed unit on the Klan took about five minutes. Did the teacher teach what she did not know? She certainly did, with self-righteousness in the bargain, and about as dismally as history can be taught. She did not even know the extent of the Klan's white supremacist agenda in contemporary America and could not have designed a responsible unit on Klan history *or* Klan current events. But she was a state-certified teacher of social studies who graduated from an accredited school of education and who, I was told by her department chairman, had an undergraduate arts and sciences minor in history. I infer, first, that one great danger in education—and one reason that education reform is so desperately needed—is *not* that one *cannot* teach what one does not know, but rather that one can. And, second, that a minor or even a major in history, by itself, guarantees nothing.

Citizen policy makers must also be prepared to keep doing the same work over and over again, repeatedly addressing the same tendencies in education toward imprecision and vagueness that are inimical to reform. After all the work we have done since November 1995, on October 8, 1997, the Massachusetts Department of Education *still* presented to the Board of Education an unacceptable preliminary draft of student performance standards for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. Four general standards of performance set the stage for further particulars:



How well do students:

- demonstrate an understanding of concepts appropriate to their grade level?
- apply knowledge and skills to solve problems?
- make connections among ideas and justify conclusions they reach?
- communicate?

In all that follows, no mention is ever made of facts, factual knowledge, or factual content—as if concepts stood alone. No mention appears of any use of knowledge as know-how to do anything except “solve problems”—itself now mere education jargon, except among some very good mathematicians and mathematics and science teachers who use the term sensibly. No mention is ever made of *logical* connections or *rational* justification of conclusions—as if the simplistic psychologism of much education discourse were compatible with logical rigor. And no reference ever appears to communication in *language*, let alone language that is literate, grammatically correct in standard English, rich in vocabulary, or refined in style.

Four levels of student performance are proposed: “Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and At Risk.” The euphemisms “basic” and “at risk” reveal educationist unwillingness ever to refer to student performance straightforwardly as deficient or failing. In my experience, we can’t improve much of anything unless we are willing to cast obvious truths in straightforward language. In education reform, one must insist on doing so repeatedly, because education has fallen into the habit of obfuscation by vagueness, diversion, imprecision, and euphemism. In education, habits of obfuscation have two basic causes that the citizen policy maker should not indulge: Intellectual sloppiness. And mushy

sentimentality that will not tolerate any truthfulness that threatens anyone's self-esteem, no matter how overinflated, self-deceptive, or unrealistic that self-esteem may be.

Now, I have used up most or all of my time without speaking of the place of public opinion in education reform. Let me conclude with a word about public opinion. I suppose you hear, as I do, that wide public involvement and support are essential to education reform. If this means the general public has to be widely involved in committees organized by state bureaucracies, in advocacy groups designed to serve as intermediaries between parents and schools, and favorably disposed toward some toothless abstraction called education reform, I don't believe it. If it means instead that more parents should be seeing to it that their children go to school regularly and on time and go to bed at a decent hour; visiting their schools, teachers, and classes; reading their children's textbooks; providing them with better readings at home; talking with them; helping with homework, reviewing homework assignments and enriching them with visits to museums, historic sites, and libraries; taking meals together; and turning off the television—and if it means that more citizens should volunteer to help out in local schools, libraries, early childhood centers, youth service agencies and youth organizations, and pediatric units in hospitals, then the assertion that citizen involvement and support are essential to the elevation of education by reform is undeniably true.

To put the matter bluntly, I do not believe that anything I will ever do as a citizen policy maker, or that the public taken in the abstract will do, can have as much effect as a few hundred academic faculty, deans, and presidents could accomplish by raising admission and performance standards in their schools of education and colleges of arts and sciences. I do not believe that any law, regulation, policy, or level of broad public

advocacy and supportiveness for education reform can have the salutary impact of individual parents who take seriously every day the raising and education of their own children.

The reform of education in America is not reducible to the elevation of curriculum and teaching in schools. Citizen policy makers who want to reform education should embrace the public, especially by reminding them of all that no educational institution can do for them and of all that they must do for themselves. Parental and other adult participation in the daily teaching and learning of children—participation in the formation of children's habits of feeling, thinking, and acting—cannot be compelled by state law, policy, regulation, or curriculum framework. Taking parenthood, adulthood, seriously involves dedication, love, conviction, and willingness to sacrifice for our children. The abundance of such maturity, decency, and devotion in the adult public matters far more than any variety of public or popular opinion ever has or ever will. To conclude by paraphrasing my friend, the late classicist Bill Arrowsmith, most of all we need grown-ups, not mere education programs.

Thank you.

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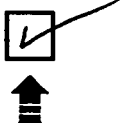
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